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Gables' Coliseum may be history

By ANTHONY FAIOLA
Herald Staff Writer

Will Rogers twirled his lasso there. The Harlem Globetrotters slam-dunked there. Sonja Henie glided on ice there. All in Coral Gables' Coliseum, a historic pink monolith that has become a victim of its own design.

The Coliseum's owners have asked the city of Coral Gables for permission to demolish the former entertainment complex built in 1927 by that city's founder, George Merrick.

The owners say the awkward size and poor condition of the 90-foot-tall, 40,000-square-foot structure has made it difficult to attract a buyer — something they've tried unsuccessfully to do for the past five years.

"It's still hard for me to talk about this without getting emotional," said Harold Vineberg, co-owner of the building at 1500 Douglas Road since 1957. "I love that building. But financially, it's been draining. It will be much easier to market the property without the building."

The Coliseum has been vacant since 1987, when the Sportsrooms, the company that leased it as a health club, went bankrupt. Since then, vandals, squatters and rodents have virtually destroyed the interior of what was once one of South Florida's most elegant arenas.

It opened with a lavish inauguration on Nov. 10, 1927. A financially strapped Merrick had been forced to sell it unfinished to the city the previous year.

In its heyday, the 7,500-seat arena played host to everything from boxing matches to professional opera. Over the years, it became a pilot's training ground, an ice rink, a bowling alley and finally a health club.

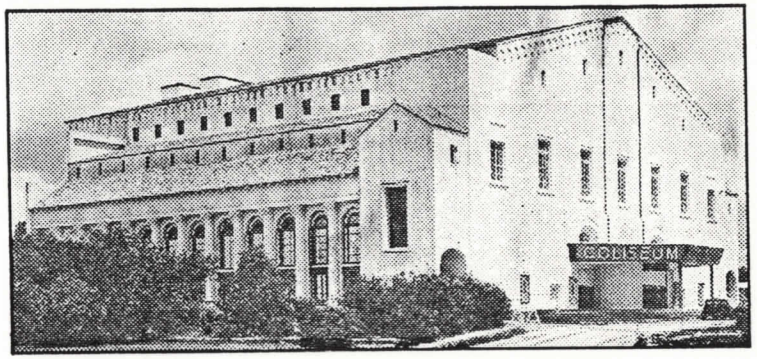
Although there have been several nibbles, no deals have materialized. Vineberg estimates renovating the building would take nearly $1 million, on top of the $6.5 million asking price.

On Thursday, Vineberg's request goes before the Coral Gables Historic Preservation Board, which will decide whether there is sufficient financial hardship to permit the demolition.

"We've been concerned about the Coliseum's future since first became vacant five years ago," said Ellen Uguccioni, Coral Gables historic preservation director. "We feel it's an extraordinarily significant structure and the most visible historic landmark in the city aside from the Biltmore Hotel.

"While it doesn't look great now, it has the potential to be very dramatic."

THE MANY FACES OF THE COLISEUM



1927: Started by the corporation owned by Coral Gables founder George Merrick, it was sold unfinished to the city of Coral Gables. It was finished before the end of year, and opened as the Miami Coliseum.

1940: Leased to Embry-Riddle Corp., and used for training future military pilots.

1949: Sold to Holiday on Ice and operated as a skating rink and headquarters for a nationally touring skating troupe.

1957: Sold to Harold Vineberg, who still co-owns it. Converted into a 30-lane bowling alley called Coliseum Lanes.

1977: Leased to Racquetball International Corp., which operated the building as Sportrooms — a super gym with 24 racquetball courts and other amenities.

1987: Sportrooms went bankrupt, and the building has been vacant ever since.